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LIMINALLY SPEAKING: PATHOS-DRIVEN APPROACHES IN AN HBCU WRITING CENTER AS A WAY FORWARD

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African American rhetorics and knowledges can be understood through a rhetorical method that is concerned with what circulates as Black, but is not limited to Black bodies, while avoiding becoming mired in the quicksand of authenticity. (27)
Vorris Nunley, *Keepin' It Hushed: The Barbershop and African American Hush Harbor Rhetoric*

Tutor Reflection

> Matthius: From a professional point of view, I wanna show the students who come in here that you don't have to look a certain way, you don't have to speak a certain way to be professional or to be intelligent. So I think that's something very important because as a child, I felt like that was something that I was constantly bombarded with—with these images, with these models of how to look, how you act, how you talk. And my thing is it shouldn't matter how you look, how you act, how you talk as long as whatchusayin' is worthwhile, as long as whatchusayin' is beneficial to somebody, and you know whatchutalkin' 'bout. I take a lot of pride in know what I'm talking about in regards to writing, and I don't care how I express that as long as that message gets there. . . . That's [African American language as a tool of instruction] something that I do consciously to show clients that you can still be . . . very learned and very versed in writing, in grammar, and things that are not necessarily considered . . . "popular."

I juxtapose Vorris Nunley's theoretical articulation alongside the reflections of participants in my 2015 case study on language interactions between self-identified African American tutees and tutors in the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) Writing Resource Center (WRC) to provide a snapshot of the circulation of language as "black" and the varying impact of its status in this historically black university's writing center. Following my line of thought leads you to accept that: 1) African Americans have a shared, complex language and cultural system resulting from their systematic oppression that require nuanced approaches to understand; 2) locating self in this system does not necessarily pin one to a monolithic conflation of that black language and culture; 3) the distance travelled between the residuals (and recurrences) of slavery and the agentic ways black people use those residuals (and recurrences) began with what Geneva Smitherman termed as *linguistic push-pull*, the DuBoisian-influenced term referring to black people who simultaneous appreciate and ridicule their language; and 4) the process of ebbing and flowing creates another space, a linguistic liminal space, that holds cultural knowledges in-between the masked cultural language trauma. A key point is that these collective traumas are repurposed in these modern-day hush harbors toward agentic ends, posing as potentially guideposts for supporting diasporic writers.

Nunley argues that there is a codified language system existing in "hush harbors," or spaces where African Americans engage in their own discourse free of the monitoring of dominant culture (23-24). It is these spaces that a hush harbor rhetoric develops, and those African American Language (AAL) and Edited American English (EAE) writers who are typically considered "unsanctioned" become authorities of their own discourse using their own methodologies (28), Matthius serving as an example. Nunley argues, then, that we need to adopt pathos-driven listening, "the attempt to hear and interpret from the cultural, epistemic, and normative assumptions of the performer, rhetor, or group producing the performance" (153). His text urges writing programs to consider the collective benefits of a concept of the "spatial rhetoric of blackness" (McFarlane 1), drawing from the polyvocality of marginalized participants in the academy through the close reading of not only the words self-identified African Americans use, but also the spaces in which they choose to use them. I see the intentional application of pathos-driven writing center practices as potentially shifting writing center practices closer towards more equitable spaces for marked identities. Specifically, I explore the ways I applied pathos-driven listening in a space historically misheard: historically black university writing centers. I focus on Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University Writing Resource Center (FAMU WRC) because of its prominence in producing black graduate students for

predominantly white institutions and my position as an alumnus. Most historically black institutions must prepare their students to traverse racially polemic academic and social landscapes. To the contrary, persons in those hegemonic spaces are not required to be remotely curious about the habits of mind of students who attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). This truth is reflected in our theories and practices: the grand narratives we choose to tell about our collective identities are centered on predominantly white institutions.

Understanding the need for a tailored approach for writers who vacillate between any two dialects, particularly AAL and EAE, requires an understanding of the interlocution of the language varieties and the broader implications on the writer's composition. When I refer to African American Language, or AAL, I am referring to the language system of African Americans rooted in African languages (Smitherman). Akin to AAL is African American literacies, which for my purposes here, leans heavily on Elaine Richardson's notion that African Americans traditionally have reading and writing skills that are drawn from the same African languages as AAL and literacy curriculum, as it stands, tends to oppose these literacies through normalizing academic literacies ("Background" 8). Understanding African American literacies, then, provides more understanding of AAL. The use of AAL in this article is pinned between white scholars' perceiving AAL as a marker for black people's deficiencies while AAL enacted (not always perceived)

> . . . is more than just words, grammar, and pronunciation; it is also rhetorics . . . [and is] what we get in classrooms [and many historically black university writing centers], what we see in students' writing, what we hear from African American orators, and what we read in African American literary works. (Kynard 358)

Edited American English is the preferred language variety for academic writing (Bartholomae; Blackledge) and is used in this article to describe the English language adapted for academic discourse. More commonly recognized as Standard English or more pedestrianly speaking "proper" or "good" English, EAE is the term I use because "edited" infers an inherent ideology, one that is at once forgotten when "standard" is used and the colloquial "proper" or "good" adjectives illustrate the pejorative implications of the use of "standard." As with any ideology, EAE "always carries with it strong social endorsements, so that what we take to exist, to have value, and to be possible seems necessary, normal and inevitable—in the nature of things" (Berlin 479). This normative view of standardized language affects which literacies circulate as what Lisa Delpit notes as *cultural power*. It is EAE that shapes writing assessments and compositionists have already begun to reimagine how EAE could marginalize non-sanctioned literacy practices, ranging from the need for multicultural rubrics (Inoue and Poe) to the language interactions of African American tutors and tutees in a public HBU writing center (Mitchell).

It's Personal

My initial instinct was to avoid writing this article for fear of stating the obvious. Where I lived, it was a rite of passage to be able to play the dozens and roll our eyes without detection well before primary school in the forbidden alleys and in backyards. We learned to spell words too adult for mainstream conversations (I still *tell stories*. I don't know when I will truly be grown enough to say anything else). *I live(d) hush harbor rhetorics*. And based on the day-to-day operations, I am certain I am not alone.

The "Center" serves as a place where we do the "hard labor" of writing instruction: the staff's business is that of improving communicative practices in its broadest senses. Faculty hold office hours, grade papers, revise articles. Students have sessions, use computers, or study at one of the desks. In the same breath, the WRC is a social space for staff and faculty, separately and collectively. Some students and faculty convene in the WRC to socialize with the staff between classes. As I write, I am steeped in thought before I realize just how quiet it is in the Center. It is almost time for our annual black history month convocation, so every facility is closed— therefore the temporarily displaced science tutors sprinkled around the tables are too engrossed to hear just how loud their silence is. Awaiting the remodeling of their center, the science tutors armed with white boards and dry erase boards in true call-response mode dominated our one-tutor-to-a-table rhythm in an open room. It was not the ideal shared space, but what can I say? *We are family. FAMUly.* The FAMU WRC's open-door policy embodies the southern charm of its location and exhibits the familial fictive kinships characteristic within an African American worldview. It is not just what we do in this space, but it is also how and why we do it that hums silently at undetectable frequencies to the untrained ear.

Why HBCUs?

More broadly, HBCUs are unique sites of education and led by administrators who are equally unique. Constantly trying to equip their students with an education, freed and enslaved black people perceived education as liberation and were at the forefront of universal education in the antebellum South (Anderson; Mitchell). The level of collaboration and foresight required to traverse the many challenges surrounding these institutions recognition and admiration, yet it is often met with closed hands, zipped pockets, and excessive criticism. Some prevailing attitudes among HBCUs suggest that these institutions are not far removed from the foundational, polemic nineteenth century debate between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois concerning the appropriate direction for the black race. Maisha T. Fisher explains these spaces "constitute a collective consciousness of values and ideologies sometimes carried in the minds and hearts of its participants in the absence of formal buildings or recognition from the dominant culture of power" (14). Fisher extends her definition her definition of institution to include churches, schools, and bookstores as sites for grooming African American children for future roles in society (15). I extend this same understanding to the WRC's role in preparing students to negotiate language in-betweenness.

The university's early focus on liberal arts education positions it to embrace a pathos-driven approach more broadly, if taken into consideration. President Thomas DeSaille Tucker, the first president of FAMU, wrote letters and speeches addressing many of these same concerns as it related to the Tallahassee, Florida—centered university: providing the Black attendees with a liberal arts education, one that directly opposed Washington's Hampton-Tuskegee Model, and thus provided a blueprint for an alternative model for Blacks in the university. The Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute became the programmatic model for systematically instructing Southern black students in such a way that assuaged most white people's fear of empowering formerly enslaved Africans with what they—the enslaved Africans—wanted most, literacy. Tucker's emphasis on literacy situated the university and its students between the pervasive racist ideology about black people's intelligence and their own perception and literate aspirations.

A brief contextualization of the origins of historically black institutions is necessary to hedge the conversation because these intentional educational communities were forged together by legal segregation and oppression: HBCUs, by their mere existence, are counterculture (Kynard and Eddy W25; Mitchell, "Reconstructing," 5-6). African Americans were legally prohibited from participating in and significantly influencing the political processes which brought adequate appropriations from state legislatures, their survival was dependent mainly upon the ability of the presidents of these institutions to persuade the legislatures to give support to their causes" (Neyland V). In essence, HBCUs' origins and survival qualify them as liminal spaces.

Liminality and Writing Centers

Liminality embodies the everyday, unspoken identities of many black tutees and tutors in writing centers. Bonnie S. Sunstein, in her article, "Moveable Feasts, Liminal Spaces: Writing Centers and the State of In-Betweenness," describes writing center spaces as antithetical to higher education because of its liminality, noting each writing interaction in writing centers as "an *in-betweenness* of literacy" (13). This "tangled tension between our students, their texts, and our readings of their texts" (Sunstein 14) as writing center practitioners resemble the tangled tensions of linguistic push pull for black student writers in writing centers. Wonderful Faison toils with similar concepts of liminality at the interstices of space and racial identity in a predominantly white writing center as she argues ". . . through [sic] critiquing of the physical space as home, comfortable, and anti-institutional that I began to listen intently not only to the discourse of the tutors of color, but the discourse of the tutors of color about this supposed comfortable space" (Faison and Treviño). Reading Faison's displacement and in-betweenness alongside writing centers' narrative of in-betweenness, reveals a paralleled experience of marginalization and an equal opportunity for possibility. It echoes Tina Campt's description of "the unsayability of words" (85), the "modality of quiet—a sublimely expressive unsayability that exceeds both words, as well as what we associate with sound and utterance—that moves [us] toward a deeper understanding of the sonic frequencies of the quotidian practices of black communities" (95). For Sunstein and Faison, the instability presses one between the agentic and the dangerous contact zones but to different ends. Although the FAMU WRC and most HBCUs do not struggle with race in overt ways, there remain "invisible webs of behaviors, shared beliefs, and languages [as well as] . . . the *absence* of a culture [that] presages many programs just finding their ways into our institutions today" (Sunstein 13). Identifying these epistemologies is an act of defiance in a society conditioned to *underhear*, as Nunley calls it,

black utterances in hush harbors like the WRC unmasks nuances in the ways black languages and ways of knowing circulate.

A significant part of my contributions to tutor education in the WRC intentionally points tutors towards our pathos-driven approaches, which two tutors describe in recent publications. Maiya Grace, an undergraduate WRC tutor, describes a consultation with a student whose cultural identity could benefit her essay. The tutee could not see it at first, but "simply discussing the topic of her essay forced [her] to identify certain differences between our cultural backgrounds . . . [and] made me more adaptable in how I used this." Treasure Glover's article, "Setting the Stage for Students to Shine," punctuates the motivation of pathos-driven approaches: she wants students "to understand [that] translating thoughts to words is a common yet magical practice, and their words matter no matter where they may fall in the language spectrum that ranges from EAE to AAL." Pathos-driven listening as an approach for writing studies in general and writing center practices supports multivocal African American speakers and writers. Nicole McFarlane, in her review of *Keepin It Hushed*, describes this form of listening as "the valuing of black cultural expressions and epistemes as means of practical wisdom" (4), a shared desire for most writing centers. The act of centering my gaze on the linguistic gifts (Williams-Farrier) African American speakers and writers bring to the writing center is an enactment of pathos-driven hearing.

The Margins Have Something to Say

The tutor and tutee reflections in this article reveal the inherent demand for something more than an addendum to writing center practices, perhaps culturally relevant pedagogies with a twist. Reflecting on the select cued recall responses of the self-identified African American tutors and tutees in my 2015 language interaction case study attuned to the frequency of the "quiet and quotidian" (Campt) further substantiates what Tina Campt describes as "this exquisite articulate modality of quiet—a sublimely expressive unsayability that exceeds both words, as well as what we associate with sound and utterance—that moves [us] toward a deeper understanding of the sonic frequencies of the quotidian practices of black communities" (4). Said differently, those cued recalls reveal how tutors and tutees create their own hush harbors and the relevant tutoring approaches when they are left in the margins of academia to fend for themselves. The dominant patterns emerging at the intersection of AAL and EAE in the five hour-long writing consultations ranged from African American Verbal Traditions such as signifying and EAE as linearity. Listening to the everyday language patterns of African American students revealed the various ways tutors and tutees mediated their language interactions at these intersections for two rhetorical ends: bonding or working. It demonstrates how LPP is institutionalized and repurposed for agentic ends. This example permits us to see the portability of trauma into meaning-making strategies (as the adage goes: eat the meat, throw away the bones) for all and requires a heightened focus on ways to effect systematic and systemic changes for linguistically vulnerable students in the margins beyond our hush harbors.

Applying a pathos-driven approach also holds space for reimaging apathetic tutees. Reading Natalie DeCheck's use of amotivation—the apathetic tutee—through the lens of pathos-driven approaches, the quiet refusals of students in writing sessions no longer exist in isolation awaiting severe typecasting as lazy or unmotivated. Instead amotivation can be heard and read as LPP in three registers, (a)motivation as reticence, (a)motivation as resistance, and (a)motivation as diversion (parentheses mine). Using this concept counters the dominant narrative that sees AAL was a deterrent from the overall learning goals of the WRC, and HBCU writing centers at large.

Tutee Reflection #1

> Meredith: I'm used to talking a certain way and I really didn't project that in my paper, so I had to listen to her [Maya] and . . . "talk how you exactly talk," so I didn't wanna sound how people say "too proper" in my paper, but I don't always speak as proper [as I should] so she said talk how you exactly talk so that it's coming from you and not something else.

In this example, Meredith demonstrated reticence as (a)motivation, an explanation confirmed in her cued-recall interview, which points to the significance of culturally significant silences. Her essay revealed instances where her intersection of AAL and EAE derailed her learning goals, so it was essential that Maya negotiate language choices with Meredith to ensure Meredith understood how to translate her AAL usage into the EAE her professor required.

Tutee Reflection #2

> Celest: As a teacher [and tutor], it's your responsibility to help your students differentiate from social communication and academic language. So . . . I guess in trying to

> reach out to your students . . . you just want them to be engaged initially. And then you can help them grow once you've got them engaged . . . You don't want to hinder the language learning process by pointing out flaws.

Celest, on the other hand, demonstrated a strong command of EAE in conversation and written communication, and therefore, exhibited more African American rhetorical strategies through amotivation as resistance. She brought a graded essay (B) to her session, she experienced moments in her session when LPP produced tutee amotivation through African American verbal traditions. Matthius challenged her perception of writing oftentimes missing her initial, nonverbal resistance. Denise Troutman attributes this blind spot to the oversaturation of emphasis of the linguistic patterns of European and African American men. She pointedly concludes that while there is a similarity between "European American women's language" and what she calls African American Women's Language (AAWL), Troutman concludes that the differences are worth further investigation (212), to which I concur. More accurately, I argue that Troutman's AAWL provides a fine-grained definition of signifying and indirection, terms usually defined in terms of men. This distinction is important to note because they characterize Matthius's misreading of Celest's shifting temperaments. Celest used latching, another part of the taxonomy of assertiveness. As Troutman clarifies, latching is "a turn-taking mechanism which occurs at the end of a conversational partner's speaking turn, avoiding an interruption or overlapping of a conversational partner's speech" (219), in order to settle a matter or "set [*sic*] the record straight" (219). Celest "set the record straight" once as she quietly waited for Matthiu to complete his thought before reiterating multiple times over the course of the tutorial that her "errors" were the result of unforeseen circumstances. Considered together, these verbal features of AAWL, AAL by extension, represent resistance as amotivation, but this resistance does not completely erode the session because the tutor eventually reads the AAL and responds with the same language, diffusing the situation AAL.

Tutee Reflection #3

> John: I think I got influenced when I came to America because I did go to a private school. We spoke British English, cuz we got colonized by Great Britain. So we speak British English, so I don't use "tryna" and stuff like that.

Diversion as amotivation manifests in John's negotiating more global definitions of AAL and EAE. A better explanation of this point is that John's use of diversion represented traditional African principles that value nonlinear approaches, whereas Matthius practiced the linear structure as is preferred protocol of the WRC. Despite John's playful nature in this session, I resisted the urge to dismiss it as an empty, solely disruptive interaction. Instead, inspired by pathos-driven listening, I viewed it in terms of LPP, concluding that these instances of amotivation were not permanent but transient, and I propose that transience is due to the shared experiences with LPP. Sharing the linguistic push-pull between tutor and tutee enabled the participants to push beyond amotivation, demonstrating a pathos-driven approach.

This valuation manifested for some participants in a deep sense of social responsibility, an example of their collective valuation of black culture. In answering this question, I also attended to three challenges: AAL instruction as a threat to "ideal blackness" in HBCUs, finding strategies for reversing the negative impact of the deficit model associated with AAL, and identifying tutors to formally teach AAL in rhetorically nuanced ways. I submit that this study reveals ways that tutors in the FAMU WRC complicate this ideal in productive ways, modeling ways they become a good example of negotiating polyvocality in these hush harbors and imports to other writing spaces.

Pathos-driven approaches demands that we listen for the quiet and the quotidian revealed in nonverbal also. Considering the implications of a frequency of nonverbal response patterns of AAL tutors and tutees functions as a counternarrative to the misreading and mishearing of black bodies in the diaspora. Writing center spaces foster a sense of community and family, allowing students and staff to collaborate on the student's specified writing goals. This collaborative environment arguably encourages low-stakes communicative practices (Balester), which includes nonverbal communication. Tutors are often trained to be attentive to the mental and physical state of the student, including remaining aware of the student's body language, so that the student and tutor can benefit from the exchange (Bruffee). However, tutors must learn to be culturally sensitive to the ways verbal and nonverbal communication is culturally situated, which requires extending and applying Nunley's pathos-driven hearing to our writing contexts.

As I listened for the ways the tutors and tutees negotiate EAE and AAL in the terms of their cultural

identity, I gained a greater appreciation for students' and tutors' rights to their own language and means of achieving their learning goals despite their traversing a historically prejudiced educational system in a site that has emerged to battle racial injustice and foster racial uplift. It was in this study that the tutors became more than proponents of a Storehouse Writing Center, fully engaging in lessons of skills and drills while interweaving AAL as an investment in improving the process of student writing. Through field notes, interviews, and observations, I was able to piece together the narratives of the tutees and tutors, such as Matthius, who is acutely aware of and confident in his uses of AAL and EAE as a means of getting work done while connecting to the shared human experiences. Pathos-driven listening allows us to move beyond pigeon-holing his use of these languages as a mistake meant to be edited by the strictures of monolinguistic views and hear how his approach to tutoring is for bonding and working functions as an extension of his philosophy of life, which speaks to the value this study adds to composition and writing center studies.

It is fair to say, then, that neglecting LPP would mean to overlook the substantial contributions of AAL writers and tutors who wrestle for their language rights on their own terms. This article demonstrates not only that AAL is dynamic, but it also informs us of its importance as a medium of instruction and reminds us that AAL, as with all languages, enmeshes the productive tensions in the margins of AAL and EAE or any liminal space. As Bonnie Williams-Farrier informs us, "Ebonics [AAL] is not just an 'American thing.' Ebonics is diaspora in language" (219). The educational system has yet to capitalize on all that can be learned from the ways we do language and learning strategies in our neck of the woods. *Liminally speaking.*

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